Studi irlandesi. A Journal of Irish Studies, n. 9 (2019), pp. 527-543
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.13128/SIJIS-2239-3978-25528

Adapting the Story of Suibhne in Neil Gaiman's *American Gods*

Victoria Yee Wei Wen
Nanyang Technological University (<vict0017@e.ntu.edu.sg>)

Abstract:

Neil Gaiman's depiction of America as a mythic place in *American Gods* explores "the soul of America" – what immigrants brought with them to America and what they found there. Existing scholarship explores Gaiman's use of mythology and folklore to create a complex, post-modern narrative that is derived from different sources. This paper will focus specifically on Gaiman's adaptation and re-creation of the Irish king Suibhne (also known as Sweeney) from different mythic narratives, forming an intertextual narrative that shows the power of storytelling in the formation of cultural identity. Further, he uses the wandering figure of Suibhne to explore the issues surrounding Irish diaspora: their emigration to America, and the implications of this cultural dislocation.

Keywords: Adaptation, Cultural identity, Diaspora, Exile, Irish myth

Published in 2001, Neil Gaiman's *American Gods* positions America as a mythic place made of diverse immigrant stories that explores, what Gaiman describes in a letter to his publisher as, the "soul of America" – "what people brought to America; what found them when they came; and the things that lie sleeping beneath it all" (Gaiman 2017b). Adaptation in the face of changing circumstances is a significant theme throughout the novel, as Gaiman explores America's history of immigrants and the cultures, beliefs and stories that they brought with them when they came to America. Much of his oeuvre, most notably *American Gods*, adapts and appropriates old stories so as to create something new, something relevant that speaks to the contemporary audience. This theme of adaptation is taken further when Gaiman adapts his novel into a TV show in 2017. While Gaiman's novel adapts old mythic narratives to renew them, the *American Gods* TV show adapts the narrative from page to screen thereby making it accessible, entertaining, and simulta-

ISSN 2239-3978 (online)

neously giving Gaiman the opportunity to update it with current events. His adaptation of mythic narratives is not limited to a specific medium, rather, these narratives seem to change form to better correspond to the current expectations and desires of society.

A minor character in an array of mythological figures, Mad Sweeney in *American Gods* is a version of the Irish king Suibhne brought to 18th century America by a girl from Bantry. As an anthropomorphic figure of the immigrants' beliefs and experiences, Sweeney is shaped through their perceptions and changes as culture changes. In the Irish tale, Suibhne is defeated by St. Ronan and cursed to wander the world. He is a figure of madness and wandering, a liminal figure that Gaiman uses to cross boundaries so as to examine Irish emigration. Gaiman adapts the Suibhne myth: his Sweeney is defeated by modern gods and drunkenly wanders around America picking bar fights. He has lost his Irish accent, drinks American liquor, and does coin tricks with gold from his leprechaun's hoard. This paper will explore the origins of *Buile Suibhne* (the medieval Irish tale about king Suibhne), its notable translations by J.G. O'Keeffe and Seamus Heaney respectively, and briefly, the literary tradition of adaptation. Gaiman's adaptation and re-creation of Suibhne from various literary narratives forms an intertextual narrative that shows the power of storytelling in the formation of cultural identity. Furthermore, in both the novel and the TV adaptation, he uses the wandering figure of Suibhne to explore the exile image central to the imagination of Irish diaspora, the emigrants' relocation to America, and the implications of this cultural dislocation. Gaiman re-creates this version of Sweeney in order to speak about the Irish immigrant experience and the eventual cultural diversity that comes to describe America. He questions what it means to be "American", delving into the creation of modern America's cultural diversity through its cultural dislocations.

1. Translation, Adaptation, Intertextuality

In his collection of nonfiction essays *The View from the Cheap Seats*, Gaiman compares myth to the fertile ground that is fundamental to humanity:

> Myths are compost. They begin as religions, the most deeply held beliefs, or as the stories that accrete to religions as they grow […] And then, as the religions fall into disuse, or the stories cease to be seen as the literal truth, they become myths. And the myths compost down to dirt, and become a fertile ground for other stories and tales which blossom like wildflowers […] New flowers grow from the compost: bright blossoms, and alive. (Gaiman 2016, 55)

He suggests that every story and myth is compost for future narratives, and it is this blossoming of new narratives that helps to make sense of the

contemporary world. This adaptation that Gaiman speaks of is important not only because it functions as the foundations of contemporary culture, but also because it allows for the subversion of traditional structures of power – traditional structures are challenged, stereotypes are undermined, and boundaries are exceeded. It is the responsibility of a storyteller to adapt and transform these traditional narratives into narratives that challenge their predecessors. The story of Suibhne begins as an Irish myth, and through translations and adaptations, transforms into Gaiman's narrative about loss, exile from one's homeland, cultural diversity in a modern society.

Gaiman's figure of Mad Sweeney is adapted from the Irish myth about an Irish king named Suibhne mac Colmain. In the tale, Suibhne flies into a rage when he hears St. Ronan building a church in his territory. After their violent confrontation, Ronan curses Suibhne to wander around the world naked, and to eventually be killed by a spear. During the battle of Mag Rath, Ronan and his psalmists bless the armies, including Suibhne, with holy water. Mistaking it for mockery, Suibhne throws his spear at a psalmist and kills him. He throws another at Ronan, but the spear only pierces the bell at Ronan's neck before breaking off as its shaft hurls through the air. Enraged, Ronan repeats his curse again. This time, the sounds from the battle drive Suibhne insane. He drops his weapons and levitates in the air like a bird. Evading several attempts by his kin to capture him, he spends many years wandering throughout various parts of Ireland, Scotland and England. Eventually, Suibhne arrives at St. Mullins, where the priest Moling gives him food and shelter in exchange for stories of his wanderings. Moling instructs his cook to leave some milk for Suibhne, but the cook's husband mistakes their meetings for a tryst and spears Suibhne in a fit of jealousy. Suibhne dies by spear-point, as Ronan had cursed, after having received Christ and being anointed by the clerics.

As far as scholars can tell, there seems to be no clear origin for the story of Suibhne. The earliest written record of his tale appears as part of a three-text cycle of Irish poetry, estimated by J.G. O'Keeffe to have been composed between 1200 and 1500. They were titled "Fleadh Duin Na N-Gedh" ("The Banquet of Dun Na N-Gedh"), "Cath Muighe Rath" ("The Battle of Magh Rath") and "Buile Suibhne" ("The Frenzy or Vision of Sweeney"). These three instalments each told the story of Suibhne at different points in his life, respectively: how the battle of Magh Rath started, how Suibhne went insane, and how he spent the rest of his life wandering. O'Keeffe's translation of *Buile Suibhne: (The Frenzy of Suibhne) Being the Adventures of Suibhne Geilt* (1913) derives from the three manuscripts. The first, on which most of O'Keeffe's translation is derived, was a "paper folio, and was written between the years 1671 and 1674 at Sean Cua, Co. Sligo, by Daniel O'Duigenan, who was one of the best of the later Irish scribes" (Sailer 1998, xiii). Considered by O'Keeffe to give "better" readings than the first, the second manuscript

had many missing stanzas while the first did not. The third manuscript only contained prose and the "occasional first lines of poetry", and was "written by Michael O'Clery, one of the Four Masters, in 1629" (xiv). O'Keeffe believes that these manuscripts were derived from different texts, and in order to reach a "common ancestor", one would have to go back a few generations. To O'Keeffe's knowledge, this "common ancestor" no longer exists, suggesting that the story of Suibhne is older than the earliest manuscripts.

In Susan Shaw Sailer's discussion on the paradoxes of the Suibhne myth, she relies heavily on previous research by O'Keeffe to argue that there are three ways to test Suibhne's historicity. The first way is through Suibhne's connection to the historical battle of Magh Rath[1] where it might yield some information on the figure of Suibhne. The second way is to investigate his title "king of Dal Araidhe" (O'Keeffe 1913, 3). The third way is through a close reading of his poetry where O'Keeffe notes that at least two Irish poems can be attributed to Suibhne. However, these three methods are ineffective because none of them provide any evidence that Suibne son of Colman Cuar existed. With the third method, Sailer acknowledges that authorship of the poems cannot be entirely attributed to be Suibhne. O'Keeffe highlights that the editors of the *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus*[2] suggest that it is St. Moling who composed the poetry. Sailer concludes: "not only may a poem frequently attributed to Suibne have been written by another person, but once again from the documents as we have them, we cannot be sure whether Suibne son of Colman Cuar may have been the writer or a different Suibne" (120). To further complicate the story of Suibhne, Sailer suggests that *Buile Suibhne* is a "composite work" (126), made up of later additions and revisions that "seem to be largely independent of floating myth, and the theme is treated in a way that is free from the literary conventions of the time" (xxxvii). The story of Suibhne is made up of revisions and re-creations – "a process of mythologising" (Clune 1996, 49), in the words of Anne Clune – that is almost impossible to keep track of especially throughout its long history. Much like Gaiman's metaphor of the wildflowers constantly gaining new ground, new stories based on old ones seem to spontaneously sprout from the fertile space of myth, adding new dimension and diversity to the body of stories that shapes the way individuals live and think. The origins of the Suibhne myth may be shrouded in mystery and speculation, but it does not diminish its effect on Irish culture and its influence on future adaptations.

Seamus Heaney's influential translation of *Buile Suibhne* brings a contemporary reading to the old Irish myth. His version, *Sweeney Astray: A Version from the Irish*, was published in 1983. Along with the Suibhne's name,

[1] There is some debate on the year the battle occured, but scholars generally agree on 637.

[2] A reproduction of a historical artefact containing Irish texts central to Irish culture.

Heaney anglicised the names of various locations in Ireland mentioned in the poem. In translating *Buile Suibhne*, Heaney took the liberty of adding or removing elements he felt did not convey the meaning of the story of Suibhne. Conor McCarthy writes of the nuances in Heaney's translation:

> Sweeney Astray is not quite a literal translation of *Buile Suibhne*, which O'Keeffe translated as "The Frenzy of Suibhne" and others have given as "The Madness of Sweeney". Rendering Suibhne as "Sweeney" is an unproblematic anglicization, and there is precedent of Flann O'Brien's "Sweeny". "Astray", however, expands the sense of the original somewhat, for as well as describing Sweeney's state of mind, it also describes his physical state – Sweeney is astray in his wanderings around Ireland, as well as being astray in his wits after the battle of Moria. Further to that, the phrase has a Hiberno-English flavour in that it recalls the Irish *ar strae*, and is more colloquial and intimate in tone than a literal translation. Heaney's translation of the work's title, then, may not be strictly literal, but is subtly suggestive in more than one way. (McCarthy 2008, 16)

While not a direct translation of the Irish original, Heaney's translation is focused on keeping and, even, expanding the meaning of the text. The figure of Suibhne is transformed through Heaney's rewriting; his situation of being physically and mentally astray is clarified, and made the focus of the tale. By rewriting it in his own mode, Heaney's translation can be seen as a "coherent work" (17), a "twentieth-century reworking in English that can be read separately from the original, as a literary work in itself" (18). McCarthy terms the language of translation a "middle voice" (19) that not only channels the meaning of the original work, but also adds new meaning and resonances to make it more accessible for a contemporary audience. In this sense, Heaney's translation can be said to be a bridge that connects contemporary readers to their cultural history.

Some critics of translation argue that translating Gaelic literature is a "form of colonisation" (Harman 1999, 122), indicating "a desire to scavenge" (Cronin 1996, 175). Mark Harman acknowledges that "translation inevitably does some violence to the original language, to the target language, or to both" (1999, 122), but he argues that translation is "one way of reversing some of the damage inflicted by colonialism – the depriving of indigenous poets of an audience in Ireland, and for that matter, abroad" (128). Quoting Franz Kafka, he explains, "Truth resides in a chorus of voices" (127). Much like Gaiman, Harman advocates for a variety of voices: "Translation can help replace the old essentialism of the one true Gael with a new plurality of voices. Variety is essential. If there is sufficient variety, there will be less likelihood of betrayal" (*ibidem*). It is only through variety, and change, that narratives are able to preserve myths and cultures in some way – to speak about the contemporary, without losing touch with cultural history. As Jack Zipes writes in his introduction to Angela Carter's translation of *The Fairy Tales of Charles Perrault*:

> Translating is not a mechanical art. Every time a work is translated it is re-created in many different ways, not only to communicate the "original" meaning of an author's work, but also to communicate the translator's personal view of what an author may have meant and what she thinks will make that particular author's work most accessible and meaningful in a different period of time and in another culture. (Zipes 2008, xxv)

Like translation, adaptation, too, makes the adapted narrative more accessible to the contemporary audience. With the novel first published in 2001, Gaiman updates the TV adaptation with pressing current issues of 2017, like the anti-immigrant rhetoric in America and other parts of the world. The story of Suibhne evolves under different translators or authors to speak to pressing contemporary issues. For example, in her paper on mythic insanity in modern Irish literature, Leah Richards Fisher asserts that Flann O'Brien's 1939 novel *At Swim-Two-Birds* uses the Suibhne myth to explore the repercussions of war: "in the aftermath of World War I and a number of violent uprisings and revolutions, Suibhne fleeing the battle of Magh Rath in frenzy serves as a metaphor for shell-shock. He represents the idealized wild man of the woods during the advent of extreme industrialization and urbanization" (Richards Fisher 1998/1999, 392). Gaiman's version of the Suibhne narrative places more focus on his wanderings, using it to speak to the issues of displacement, exile and cultural alterity that Irish emigrants face as a result of their emigration to America. This emphasises the need for translators and authors to constantly renew narratives to make it relevant to current issues, as mythic narratives can contain different metaphors or images that resonate with issues of different time periods. The story of Suibhne, like many other narratives, is a palimpsest with different versions of the story overlapping each other to create a multidimensional, heterogenous body of stories that are bound up with their socio-cultural and historical connections. In fact, from his title *Sweeney Astray: A Version from the Irish*, it is clear Heaney views his narrative as a "version" rather than a literal translation. As Denell Downum's analysis succinctly puts it, "translation is an inherently metonymic process, rather than a metaphoric one" (Downum 2009, 77). At their most basic level, translation, adaptation and re-creation are processes that refer to change. Narratives are changed and re-created, enabling them to examine the new and foreign without allowing the narrative to be characterised by its foreignness.

This element of adaptation and re-creation is clearly seen in Gaiman's adaptation of the Suibhne narrative for his novel *American Gods* and his adaptation of his version of Mad Sweeney for television. Keeping in line with his agenda as a storyteller, Gaiman's TV adaptation of *American Gods* does not merely bring his novel to life visually. Gaiman breathes new life into his narrative with what another producer calls "fan fiction" (Freeman 2017)

of his own work, expanding or adding new storylines to update and make his narrative relevant to the current socio-political climate of modern day America. In doing so, he challenges traditional structures and stereotypes by disregarding the authority of one narrative, and instead, focusing on the smaller, marginalised stories of individuals. Beneath the mythic battles and mysterious gods hiding in human guises, *American Gods* (be it in the medium of a novel or a television show) is about what it means to be "American". Beyond that, it also explores what it means to be a citizen of our globalised world, and its implications. Through his rewriting of old myths and stories, Gaiman communicates the fluidity of culture and tradition. Culture is not made of a static body of narratives. It is a continuous process of struggling to find or create meaning in an increasingly desacralised world.

In his novel *American Gods* and its TV adaptation, Gaiman's re-creation of Sweeney reveals influences from Irish writers such as W.B. Yeats and James Joyce, and recalls notable works like Heaney's translation *Sweeney Astray* and O'Brien's novel *At Swim-Two-Birds*. O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds* begins with the line: "One beginning and one ending for a book was a thing I did not agree with" (O'Brien 2005 [1939], 1). The way he sees storytelling as organic and fluid corresponds to Gaiman's similarly organic take on storytelling. O'Brien uses the old Suibhne myth to contrast old and new stories much like *American Gods*' premise of the battle between the old gods and the new gods. This tension between the old and the new, between tradition and innovation, is a dichotomy that Gaiman navigates with his renewing of mythic narratives. The story of Suibhne "is essential for the development of *At Swim-Two-Birds* and recurs four times: first as a *pastiche* translation from Gaelic provided by O'Brien himself, then three more times as parodic manipulations of that initial translation" (Mazzullo 1995, 318). *At Swim-Two-Birds* parodies the story of Suibhne, and can be considered as a comic version of the Irish myth. The element of comedy is echoed in Gaiman's Sweeney, who is depicted as a tragicomic character trying to drunkenly overcome his struggles but failing in a spectacularly violent fashion. In *The Folkloresque*, Timothy Evans argues: "Gaiman's goal […] is the pursuit of human universals through intertextuality. Universals, for Gaiman, do not reside exclusively in literary or fine arts canons or in folklore, but must be pursued, and re-created from, elements from throughout the world's cultures, genres and art forms" (Evans 2016, 67). The re-creations and versions of Sweeney by other authors resonate in Gaiman's Sweeney – "we have Yeats's leprechauns, the mythic fiction of Joyce, and O'Brien's tragi-comic Sweeny: Irish ingredients for an American character" (Alexander 2007, 153). The narrative of Sweeney now encompasses not only Gaiman's American reimagining of the Irish tale, but the versions by Heaney, O'Brien, and other translators and authors. It is not only meant to be a modern adaptation of the Irish tale, but also an amalgamation of stories from different sources. The novel's transtextual quality

stems from Gaiman's emphasis on adaptation and the importance of remaking and updating stories to make sense of the world through them. His adaptation of the Suibhne myth updates the narrative in order to examine the contemporary issues of migration and cultural alterity – specifically, regarding the Irish emigration to America and the process of "Americanisation".

2. Emigration and "Americanisation"

In his novel *American Gods*, Gaiman's conceptualisation of America as a country of immigrants is highlighted in his frequent interludes titled "Coming to America", detailing the individual stories behind the gods' arrival in America. As Gaiman writes, "Nobody's American. Not originally" (Gaiman 2016 [2001], 125). During a speech to rally the old gods against the new gods, Wednesday (the American version of the Norse god Odin) recalls their arrival to America:

> When the people came to America they brought us with them. They brought me, and Loki and Thor, Anansi and the Lion-God, Leprechauns and Cluracans and Banshees, Kubera and Frau Holle and Ashtaroth, and they brought you. We rode here in their minds, and we took root. We travelled with the settlers to the new lands across the ocean. […] [Now] there are new gods growing in America, clinging to growing knots of belief: gods of credit-card and freeway, of internet and telephone, of radio and hospital and television, gods of plastic and of beeper and of neon. (160)

His speech illustrates the diversity of cultures and mythic narratives that arrived in America along with the immigrants. It highlights the rich and diverse cultural history of America, and the way modernisation has led to the diminishing belief in traditional mythic and religious narratives. Once popularly known as the New World during the sixteenth-century, America is frequently associated with modernisation. The new gods of America are representative of the desacralised and impersonal modern society, characterised by advances in technology, commercialisation and consumerism.

Mad Sweeney is a minor character who is employed by Wednesday to join him in his battle against the new gods. Three thousand years ago, Gaiman's version of Sweeney started out as a guardian of a sacred rock in a little Irish glade. Much like the traditional stories of Suibhne, he had a life filled with love affairs and violent feuds before he went mad. Like a bird, he ate watercress and flew across the whole of Ireland. It was his madness that gave him power, and as more worshipped and believed in him, his legend grew. Believing she had seen him one night by the pool, Essie McGowan[3] from Bantry

[3] She is known as "Essie Tregowan" in the book. In the TV adaptation, Gaiman merged the stories of two characters to extend Sweeney's involvement in the narrative.

Bay believed in Mad Sweeney the leprechaun to the extent that her immense belief brought him along to America. This version of Sweeney also seems to be conflated with the leprechauns from Irish folklore, associating him with the leprechauns' pot of gold.

The TV adaptation extends Sweeney's story, depicting how he arrived in eighteenth-century America. When Essie is wrongfully arrested for stealing, Sweeney is brought along to Newgate Prison in London by her belief in the old stories of piskies and leprechauns. He is then transported to America along with her, as she is sentenced to be an indentured servant for her multiple offences of theft. The years pass, she marries eventually and tells her children these stories, teaching them to leave the first fish of the catch or a fresh-baked loaf of bread to obtain the blessing of the spirits. When her children grow up to have children of their own, she tries to tell the same stories to her grandchildren, but they only want to hear about "Jack up the Beanstalk" or "Jack Giant-killer". In the TV adaptation of Essie's last moments, the narrator verbalises her thoughts: "There seemed no room for the spirits of old in Virginia, so Essie no longer told her tales. She kept them in her heart, where they warmed her like her father's stew on a chill night in Bantry Bay a lifetime ago" ("A Prayer for Mad Sweeney"). She dies peacefully on her porch, in the house and on the land she has come to consider her home. Uncharacteristically somber, Sweeney tells her, "It was you that brought me here, you and a few like you, into this land with no time for magic and no place for piskies and such folk" (Gaiman 2016 [2001], 121). Here, Essie and Sweeney both speak of their complex and contradictory feelings towards America. While they have both managed to live comfortably in America, there still seems to be an element of displacement and longing to be back home in Ireland. The concepts of exile, diaspora and longing for home is central to the Irish immigrant experience and the construction of their cultural identity, and are commonly explored in literature about Irish emigration.

Gaiman invokes Sweeney's mythological background as an exiled king cursed to wander the world to speak about the displacement the emigrants faced when arriving in the New World. In *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America*, Kerby Miller explains the origins of the exile image, and their reasons for characterising emigration as exile:

> The exile image was not just a rhetorical device employed by Irish and Irish-American nationalists. Nor was it merely of American origins – like the St. Patrick's Day parades – simply a product of Irish alienation or self-assertion in the New World. All emigrants in America experienced some degree of estrangement, but the Irish view of themselves as exiles sprang from sources more profound than the poverty and prejudice encountered abroad. In short, there seems no reason inherent in either the actual circumstances of most emigrants' departures or the material conditions of Irish-American life which automatically translated a homesickness perhaps common to all emigrants into a morbid perception of themselves as involuntary,

passive victims of English oppression. For, viewed objectively, they had made a rational response to structural changes in Irish society and to the promptings of their own ambitions for the better material life which recent scholarship indicates they generally achieved. (Miller 1985, 7)

While all emigrants in America had to deal with issues of displacement, Miller suggests it was more complicated for the Irish emigrants largely because of their Irish Catholic view of the world that was deeply rooted in Irish history and culture. He writes that the "subsequent historical circumstances of rebellion and defeat, despoliation and impoverishment, served to ratify and magnify aspects of pre-conquest Irish culture which made the exile motif seem more poignant and appropriate" (8). Amidst modern commercial and industrial revolutions, such a worldview disadvantaged them politically, economically and psychologically. As a result, they fell back on their cultural traditions, adapting them to deal with the pressures of modernisation. This resulted in their "ideological defense against change and misfortune, and the basis for a nationalistic assertion of Irish identity" (*ibidem*), which, in turn, lead to the perpetuation of "the archaic tradition of emigration as exile in the modern context of conflict with England as origin of both political oppressions and economic deprivation" (*ibidem*). There were specific personal reasons why Irish emigrants viewed themselves as involuntary exiles, but Miller acknowledges that these reasons had "remote, if any, connections with English 'tyranny' over Ireland" (*ibidem*). To sum it up, Miller attributes a combination of factors that led to the exile image: their strong connections to Irish culture and tradition, historical circumstances of rebellion, defeat and impoverishment, and as a way of "explaining" the impersonal workings of the modern economy. Through Essie's forced transportation to America, Gaiman distinctly invokes the exile image in an attempt to examine the complex experience of Irish emigration. In her situation, the exile image is apt: she is forced to leave for America, or be sentenced to death for her thievery. She has no choice but to adapt to her new life in America, maintaining her strong connections to Irish culture and tradition through her tradition of leaving some food for the leprechauns and fairies. She also passes on her grandmother's stories to her children and grandchildren, despite their lack of interest in her traditional Irish stories. Although she cannot return home, she remains strongly rooted in her Irish culture and identity, longing for her home where such stories of leprechauns are not out of place.

Gaiman's depiction of Irish emigration is particularly interesting because it provides an alternative view from a women-centred perspective. In her chapter on Irish women and the diaspora, Mary Daly posits that there is strong evidence to suggest that "emigration was of greater benefit to women than to men, mainly because of the poor opportunities that Ireland offered them" (Daly 2014, 23). Her analysis cites David Fitzpatrick's assertion that

emigration was "female escapology" – "for those women who left Ireland, the nineteenth century was often a time of triumph rather than subjection" (Fitzpatrick 1990, 167-168). According to Miller's research, this is because the economic value of women's labour deteriorated after the famine, exacerbating their already inferior status. Emigration, however, had the possibility of "economic independence, marriage without the need for parental dowry, or flight from moral disgrace and consignment to the unmarriageable, because she had given birth to a child outside marriage" (Daly 2014, 23). This made the prospect of emigration immensely attractive despite the struggles that they would have to face in America. She summarises Miller's overall argument: "many Irish-Catholic emigrants carried with them to the US a pre-modern, passive value system, which predisposed them to view emigration as exile, and they continued to regard the US and American industrial urban society in an ambivalent manner" (*ibidem*). However, Miller goes on to explain how "better economic prospects helped those from most disadvantaged backgrounds to overcome homesickness and adopt a more positive attitude" (*ibidem*). Gaiman's depiction of Essie's life and how she came to America gives voice to the financial issues women faced in Ireland that made emigration an attractive prospect for them. Although Essie attempts to return after she is transported, she eventually has no choice but to emigrate or be sentenced to death. Given her options, she chooses to emigrate and starts a new life for herself in America, where "anyone can be anything they insist upon" ("A Prayer for Mad Sweeney"). As she tells Sweeney in the TV adaptation, America is the place where she can start anew, where she can have a "new name, new life" ("A Prayer for Mad Sweeney"). America is thus seen as a place of exile and opportunity. Essie is displaced from her home, but she is also able to benefit from the better opportunities that America offers, as well as the freedom to start anew and enjoy a financially comfortable life there.

The tension between America as a place of exile and opportunity speaks to the complexity of Irish diaspora. As M.J. Hickman writes in her chapter "Thinking about Ireland and Irish diaspora", "Irish migrants have had an important impact on the (re)formation of the national spaces and national imaginaries of their main settlement destinations. They are not just *of* Ireland, but *of* their new place […] Individual and social groups in the diaspora are *between* and *of* the two processes simultaneously" (Hickman 2014, 137). She speaks of a hybrid cultural identity that challenges the Ireland-America binary. Emigrants are not merely of their homeland, or of their new place – their cultural identity is made up of complex processes that "change over time as part of the political, social and economic developments in and between various places of settlement (including the 'homeland')" (138). Daly, too, speaks of a hybrid identity as a kind of integration, "retaining links with the country of origin, while integrating into the country of immigration" (Daly 2014, 27). This emphasis on a hybrid cultural identity suggests that

the migrant experience is complex and heterogenous. No single experience is capable of representing the nuances of loss, displacement, and hope that immigrants experience in America. This makes *American Gods*' inclusive and heterogenous mythic narrative all the more vital in articulating the diverse, complex narratives that make up the immigrant experience in America. Its use of multiple mythic narratives and its adaptation of them advocate for nuanced and heterogenous explorations of cultural identity, dismantling the Ireland-America binary by portraying characters like Essie and Sweeney who are between and of both countries simultaneously.

While Gaiman's narrative depicts cultural identity to be complex and hybrid, its depiction of the Irish immigrant experience is still, to a small extent, problematic because it fails to explore the less positive aspects of the immigrant experience. Hickman discusses how the mid-nineteenth century's post-slavery era contributed to the "Americanisation" of the Irish immigrants:

> It was a period characterised by a rhetoric that excluded new Irish immigrants from the American Dream as the most reviled of foreign immigrants […] The change in the positioning of "the Irish", from ambiguous racial group and reviled ethno-religious group, is directly related to the changes wrought by the processes of re-racialisation that resulted after the civil war and emancipation. Groups such as "the Irish" of previously ambiguous status were consolidated as "white" by virtue of being classified as "ethnic". Simultaneously this process opened a route to Americanisation, although this was far from a straightforward process. (Hickman 2014, 139)

This prejudice against Irish immigrants is also echoed in Daly's discussion of the prejudice against Irish women. While she believes there is no reason to assume women were targeted in particular, she acknowledges that there existed several American practices that revealed such prejudice against Irish women. Daly explains, "The American practice of using Bridget as the generic name for Irish servants, and complaints about 'how unspeakably atrocious the Hibernian maid-of-all work' are indications of the antipathy shown by many Americans towards Irish servants" (Daly 2014, 29). David Katzman also suggests that "anti-Catholicism was at the heart of antipathy towards the Irish" (Katzman 1981 [1978], 163), along with insinuations of their differences in standards and lifestyles. "Americanisation" in *American Gods*, while explored abstractly in terms of diverse cultural and religious narratives, is not fully explored as a complex process of economic, political and racial negotiations. At times, Essie's narrative alludes to her struggles in a modernising American society, but her story does not go into detail about specific instances involving prejudice or difficulty in adapting to the modern economy.

Aside from the issues of exile and diaspora, Gaiman also depicts the immigrants' struggle to adapt to modernisation. He repeatedly shows that America is no place for old stories, magic and gods. The struggle to adapt

amid constant change is not a new concept, as Sweeney explains of the history of the Irish gods:

> Wave after wave of them as they came in from Gaul and from Spain, and from every damn place, each wave of them transforming the last gods into trolls and fairies and every damn creature until Holy Mother Church herself arrived and every god in Ireland was transformed into a fairy or a saint or a dead King without so much as a by-your-leave… (Gaiman 2016 [2001], 259)

Change and transformation is inevitable, and this is seen in the way religions and cultures evolve throughout time to reflect changes in society – more specifically in the case of America, "all who inhabit it are subject to transformation […] diaspora space focuses on the creation of new social relations and identifications resulting from the specificities of encounters" (Hickman 2014, 138). This transformation as a result of the encounters between different cultures and religions is what leads to "national formation" (138). Gaiman depicts America as a world where traditions and stories of the old ways are lost, but it is also a diverse world where everyone is an immigrant with his or her own culture and story to tell. He implies that it is up to people to make connections from differences, and choosing to come together with respect for differences rather than merely uniting under a basis of essential identity. There is no doubt that some aspects of cultural identity and traditions are lost in the process of globalisation, but there is also the opportunity to learn to appreciate and gain an understanding of other different cultures. Being "American", then, is a construction of identity based on choosing to embrace cultural differences – as Donna Haraway famously advocates, a politics of "affinity, not identity" (2010 [1985], 2197).

Cultural identity, Gaiman suggests, is adaptable and fluid. Sweeney, and by extension, the rest of the American versions of the old gods, represents the evolving and ever-changing culture of America. As the gods are a personification of people's beliefs, their "Americanisation" shows how diaspora gives way to myth-making, to the re-creation and adaptation of one's culture so as to make sense of the new place one inhabits. In the TV adaptation, Gaiman alludes to this in a scene where Sweeney cryptically comments on his history: "I was a king once […] Then they made me a bird. Then Mother Church came along and turned us all into saints and trolls and fairies. General Mills did the rest" (Gaiman 2017a). It is a reference to Sweeney's mythic roots as the Irish king Suibhne mac Colmain, who, as the tale goes, was cursed by St. Ronan to wander the world as a bird after their territorial dispute about building a church in Suibhne's lands. He also alludes to the Christianisation of Europe, and the way perceptions of traditional Irish folktales changed over time. His reference to General Mills highlights the way leprechauns from Irish folklore have been adapted into commercialised cartoon figures pro-

moting cereal. Gaiman's Sweeney himself is portrayed as an amalgamation of the Irish king Suibhne and the mythical figure of the leprechaun, suggesting the mythic and cultural narratives that the gods represent are malleable:

> It means you give up your mortal existence to become a meme: something that lives forever in people's minds, like the tune of a nursery rhyme. It means that everyone gets to recreate you in their own minds. You barely have your own identity any more. Instead, you're a thousand aspects of what people need you to be. And everyone wants something different from you. Nothing is fixed, nothing is stable. (Gaiman 2016 [2001], 534)

Gaiman suggests that culture is all about storytelling, and all forms of culture demonstrate the limitless adaptability of folklore. The general plot of *American Gods* is premised on the imminent battle between the old gods, those like Odin and Sweeney, and the new gods, Media and Technical Boy (who represents the internet). However, it becomes clear along the course of the narrative that this is a "false dichotomy" (Evans 2016, 72). It is not so much a battle between the old gods and the new gods, but rather, the "battle between the multiplicity of voices and the fast-paced, mobile, transitory nature of American culture" (72). Sweeney's backstory is especially relevant here because this is not the first time he suffers due to his resistance to change. Although he acclimatises to America and grows to become more American than Irish in his preferences and habits, he is still resistant to more profound change, unwilling to use technology to maintain his power. The Irish folktale from which he is derived tells the story of a man unable to adapt to the new ways, and so, he is driven insane and spends the rest of his life wandering alone.

Gaiman's Sweeney deviates slightly from the preceding narratives – this Americanised version of the Irish mythic figure has lost his Irish accent, drinks American liquor, does coin tricks with his hoard of gold, and picks bar fights as he wanders around America. Gaiman's version of Sweeney has been adapted in order to speak about Irish immigrant experience in America. In a reflection of the original myth *Buile Suibhne*, the Americanised version of Sweeney also wanders aimlessly, struggling to remain relevant in a contemporary America where modern gods like Technical Boy and Media are more powerful because of society's immense belief in them. Echoing the way he was violently resistant against the Christianisation of Europe, Mad Sweeney likewise resists change once again and refuses to adapt in order to attain more believers. Gaiman depicts other gods like Bilquis (based on the biblical figure called the Queen of Sheba) adapting to modern technology by using dating apps. As an ancient goddess of love, Bilquis uses dating apps to attract and seduce her believers, thereby retaining a measure of her power. The Germanic goddess of spring, Ostara, compromises in order to survive,

capitalising on the celebration of Easter to stay in power even though the holiday has nothing to do with her; Vulcan (a character Gaiman created for the TV adaptation), the Roman god of fire, learns to franchise his faith by starting a bullet factory so that those who fire his bullets would be praying in his name. This is, in itself, a reflection of the way new myths are made as cultures evolve and modernise. Ostara capitalising on the commercial power of Easter and Vulcan franchising his faith are examples of the way Gaiman remakes myths into stories relevant for a modern audience. Sweeney, however, has not managed to adapt to modern culture in a way that allows him to flourish – the extent of his adaptation to the modern world is represented by General Mills' cartoonish leprechaun mascot for the cereal "Lucky Charms". Sweeney's resistance to change emphasises the difficulty of maintaining one's connection to traditional culture while adapting to the modern world enough to flourish. How would one remain "Irish" outside of Ireland? How would one preserve the Irish culture in modern adaptations without diminishing it or essentialising it? These struggles are not only present in issues of Irish diaspora, but also in any instance of cultural dislocation.

As a British-Indian writer writing about his homeland from outside his homeland, Salman Rushdie, too, struggles with the complexity of speaking about the "phenomena of cultural transplantation" (Rushdie 1992 [1991], 20). In the first chapter of *Imaginary Homelands*, he questions: "What does it mean to be 'Indian' outside India? How can culture be preserved without becoming ossified? […] These questions are all a single, existential question: how are we to live in the world?" (17-18). Rushdie does not claim to have any answers, and there is no doubt there will not be simple answers to questions as complex as those. Despite the lack of easy answers, authors like Rushdie and Gaiman tell their stories in the attempt to articulate the negotiation between conflicting cultural identities, and perhaps, even to articulate the need for hybrid cultural identity that integrates elements from both the country of origin and the country of immigration – as scholars like Daly and Hickman have argued. Homi Bhabha's conceptualises hybridity as a space where traditional concepts are relocated and translated, encouraging cross-cultural ideas that exceed the boundaries of culture and venture into new directions. His argument rejects the notion of a "pure" culture, as culture is complex and contradictory to begin with. Bhabha defines hybridity as "that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew" (Bhabha 1995, 208). Hybridity is seen as a liminal space, a "split-space of enunciation [that] may open the way to conceptualizing an inter-national culture, based not on the exoticism or multi-culturalism of the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity" (209). A hybrid cultural identity can be likened

to Gaiman's re-creation of America as being made up of diverse and different cultures coming together in a new way to create a heterogenous "American" identity that celebrates the similarities between cultures and embraces the differences as a potential for cross-cultural innovation.

Mad Sweeney is representative of the disadvantages that come with failing to adapt under the pressures of emigration and modernisation. In various versions of the Suibhne myth, he is a figure that repeatedly fails to adapt to change and forms of modernisation, rendering him exiled and disconnected from the rest of his community. These recurring themes of diaspora and displacement speak to the alienation that individuals suffer in the face of an impersonal and commercialised modern society. Gaiman uses the story of Suibhne in such innovative ways so as to articulate anxieties about a rapidly changing world: by re-telling his version of the myth, he makes it relevant for a contemporary audience; he explores the exile image central to the Irish emigrant experience; and he emphasises the power of storytelling in the formation of a hybrid cultural identity that is adaptable under the pressures of modernity.

Works Cited

Alexander William (2007), "On the Death of Mad King Sweeney: Irish Lore and Literature in *American Gods",* in Darrell Schweitzer (ed.), *The Neil Gaiman Reader*, Cabin John, Wildside Press, pp. 149-153.

Bhabha H.K. (1995), "Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences", in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin (eds), *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, London, Routledge, 206-212.

Clune Anne (1996), "Mythologising Sweeney", *Irish University Review* 26, 1, 48-60, <www.jstor.org/stable/25484648> (05/2019).

Cronin Michael (1996), *Translating Ireland: Translation, Languages, Cultures*, Cork, Cork UP.

Daly Mary (2014), "Irish Women and the Diaspora: Why They Matter", in D.A.J. MacPherson, Mary Hickman (eds), *Women and Irish Diaspora Identities*, Manchester, Manchester UP, 17-33, <www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1mf70fb.7> (05/2019).

Downum Denell (2009), "Sweeney Astray: The Other in Oneself", *Éire-Ireland* 44, 3, 75-93.

Evans T.H. (2016), "Folklore, Intertextuality, and the Folkloresque in the Works of Neil Gaiman", in M.D. Foster, J.A. Tolbert (eds), *The Folkloresque. Reframing Folklore in a Popular Culture World*, Logan, Utah State UP, 64-80.

Fitzpatrick David (1990), " 'A share of the honeycomb': Education, Emigration and Irishwomen", in Mary Daly, David Dickson (eds), *The Origins of Popular Literacy in Ireland: Language Change and Educational Development 1700-1920*, Dublin, University College and Trinity College, 167-168.

Freeman Molly (2017), "Starz's American Gods Series is 'Fan-Fiction' of Neil Gaiman's Novel", *Screenrant*, <https://screenrant.com/american-gods-neil-gaiman-fan-fiction-starz/> (05/2019).

Gaiman Neil (2016 [2001]), *American Gods*, London, Headline.
— (2016), *The View from the Cheap Seats: Selected Nonfiction*, New York, HarperCollins.
— (2017a), *American Gods*, the series, seasons 1 and 2, produced by Bryan Fuller and Michael Green for Starz, <https://www.starz.com/series/americangods/episodes> (05/2019).
— (2017b), "Neil's Work. Books. American Gods", <http://www.neilgaiman.com/works/books/American+Gods/in/184/> (05/2019).
Haraway Donna (2010 [1985]), "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Femminism in the 80s", in V.B. Leitch (ed.), *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, New York, Norton, 2190-2220.
Harman Mark (1999) "Rough Magic: Translating *Buile Suibhne*", *New Hibernia Review / Iris Éireannach Nua* 3, 2, 122-128, <www.jstor.org/stable/20557558> (05/2019).
Heaney Seamus (1983), *Sweeney Astray: A Version from the Irish*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
Hickman M.J. (2014), "Thinking about Ireland and the Irish Diaspora", in Tom Inglis (ed.), *Are the Irish different?*, Manchester, Manchester UP, 133-143, <www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt18mvn5q.18> (05/2019).
Katzman D.M. (1981 [1978]), *Seven Days a Week: Women and Domestic Service in Industrializing America,* Champaign, University of Illinois Press.
Mazzullo Concetta (1995), "Flann O'Brien's Hellish Otherworld: From *Buile Suibhne* to *The Third Policeman*", *Irish University Review* 25, 2, 318-327, <www.jstor.org/stable/25511507> (05/2019).
McCarthy Conor (2008), "Sweeney Astray", in Id., *Seamus Heaney and Medieval Poetry*, Cambridge, Boydell & Brewer, 13-52, <www.jstor.org/stable/10.7722/j.ctt820f8.6> (05/2019).
Miller K.A. (1985), *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America,* Oxford, Oxford UP.
O'Brien Flann (2005 [1939]), *At Swim-Two-Birds*, Dublin, Dalkey Archive Press.
O'Keeffe J.G. (ed.) (1913), *Buile Suibhne: (The Frenzy of Suibhne) Being the Adventures of Suibhne Geilt. A Middle Irish Romance*, London, Irish Text Society.
Richards Fisher Leah (1998/1999), " 'No Nation Wanted it so Much': Mythic Insanity in the Development of a Modern Irish Literature", in Michael Linkletter, Diana Luft, Hugh Fogarty *et al.* (eds), *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, 18-19, Harvard UP, 385-395, <www.jstor.org/stable/20557351> (05/2019).
Rushdie Salman (1992 [1991]), *Imaginary Homelands. Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*, London, Granta.
Sailer S.S. (1998), "Suibne Geilt: Puzzles, Problems, and Paradoxes", *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 24, 1, 115-131, <www.jstor.org/stable/25515239> (05/2019).
Zipes Jack (2008), "Introduction", in Angela Carter (ed.), *The Fairy Tales of Charles Perrault*, Harmondworth, Penguin, vii-xxvii.